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Letter dated 19 February 2016 from the Permanent Representative of Lithuania to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to transmit herewith a letter dated 18 February 2016 from the representative of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Raimonda **Murmokaitė**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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Annex to the letter dated 19 February 2016 from the Permanent Representative of Lithuania to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

On behalf of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, it is with great alarm that I draw your attention to the deliberate escalation of indiscriminate air strikes by Russian forces throughout the civilian occupied areas of northern Syria, in direct violation of Security Council resolutions 2258 (2015), 2254 (2015), 2209 (2015), 2165 (2014) and 2139 (2014) and in clear contravention of international law.

On Monday, 15 February 2016, Russian air forces, acting in collaboration with Assad regime forces, launched a series of targeted bombings on medical and educational facilities in northern Syria that left at least 45 civilians dead and dozens of others wounded. In total, six hospitals and one medical facility, serving some 23,000 patients per month, were targeted. In Maarat al-Numan, in Idlib governorate, two hospitals were bombed, one of which was supported by Médecins Sans Frontières and was the repeated subject of missile attacks. In A'zaz, a mother and child hospital supported by the United Nations was also bombed, as was the general hospital. Also in A'zaz, Russian forces bombed a school that sheltered internally displaced persons, killing 14 civilians.

Russia's attacks on Syria's hospitals and schools were intentional and premeditated. All of the hospitals' locations were well known and well documented, and their civilian character was abundantly clear to the Russian authorities. The decision to target Syria's medical infrastructure — in spite of or, more accurately, because of the vital services they provide — represents a deliberate strategy on Russia's part to destroy civilian life in opposition-held areas and to render these areas uninhabitable. The attacks almost certainly constitute grave war crimes.

Russia's attacks on Syria's hospitals are just the latest and most heinous example of Russia's unwanted meddling in and occupation of Syria and its calculated campaign of war crimes. Russia's attacks on Syria's hospitals represent a war crime, punishable under international humanitarian law. Hospitals, medical units and health-care personnel must all receive special protection under international humanitarian law. Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 demands that Syria's wounded and sick be collected and cared for, yet, by directing attacks against hospitals caring for the sick and wounded, Russia has flagrantly violated this law.

On behalf of the Syrian people, I therefore call upon individual Member States and the United Nations:

(a) To launch an investigation into the attacks of 15 February on medical facilities and schools in northern Syria and ensure that the investigation attributes responsibility;

(b) To demand the immediate exit of all foreign parties to the conflict in Syria, including the Russian Federation, Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and condemn the actions of Russian forces in the strongest terms;

(c) To protect civilians from future indiscriminate strikes by Russia and Syrian regime forces, including by enforcing a no-bombing zone across Syria, with the aim of deterring indiscriminate air strikes against civilians;

(d) To ensure accountability for all war crimes committed by referring the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court, launching a case under universal jurisdiction or taking measures to establish an independent international criminal tribunal for Syria.

The attacks of 15 February were not an outlier for Russian forces in Syria; they were, in fact, business as usual. In the four months that its air forces have been bombing throughout Syria, Russia has been responsible for more than 1,500 civilian deaths. Russian forces have mercilessly attacked schools, hospitals and water treatment facilities. They have killed women and children. While claiming to seek out terrorists, the vast majority of Russian targets — over 95 per cent, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights — have been civilians. Such intervention is unwanted, illegitimate and illegal. It is patently outrageous to be striking bilateral deals with Russia, as was the case in Munich, on the "cessation of hostilities" when those deals do not include a cessation by one of the leading killers of civilians in Syria: the Russian Federation. It is high time that Russia left Syria and ended its brutal war on our civilians.

(*Signed*) Khaled **Khoja**
President
National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces